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ABSTRACT

In the eleven years since its inception, over four thousand teachers from all grade levels and content areas have studied in the Iowa Writing Project's summer institutes. This paper reports on a study on the ways in which the project influences teachers' beliefs and practices. The study was conducted by means of surveys, interviews, case studies, and over 70 hours of classroom observation with participants in the project. Results of the study support the assertion that participation in the Iowa Writing Project can and does change teachers' beliefs and practices about writing and the teaching of writing. (JD)

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INSERVICE EDUCATION AND TEACHER CHANGE:
A STUDY OF WRITING PROJECT GRADUATES

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INSERVICE EDUCATION AND TEACHER CHANGE:
A STUDY OF WRITING PROJECT GRADUATES

In the summer of 1978, just as the National Writing Project was beginning to establish its interstate network of writing project sites, Iowa's independent writing project (IWP) took root. In the eleven years since its conception, over four thousand teachers from all grade levels and content areas have studied in the Iowa Writing Project's summer institutes.

This writing project movement has been greeted with much acclaim. Moffett refers to it as "The most positive development in English education . . . during the whole period since World War II . . . ." It has, he says, "accomplished far more good than all of the U. S. Office of Education Project English curriculum centers of the '60s put together" (1981, p. 81). Others talk in general terms about how writing project participants "have significantly improved their classroom teaching skills . . ." (Daniels and Zemelman, 1985, p. 4). In addition, more specific "success" stories are told. One informal study of a high school English teacher claimed that "Although, after ten years of teaching, she was at the same school, teaching the same courses, she was not the same teacher she had been before . . . [the project]." (Bunch, 1980, p. 2).

Informal stories, then, tell us that these programs can and do change teachers' beliefs and practices. As a writing project graduate and a writing project instructor, I was curious as to the ways in which that might be so. Using surveys, interviews,

case studies, and over 70 hours of classroom observation with past participants in the Iowa Writing Project, I attempted to understand the ways in which the project influences teachers' beliefs and practices. Today in presenting some of what I learned, I will draw on the voices of several of the 79 teachers with whom I worked.

This study clearly supports the assertion that participation in the Iowa Writing Project can and does change teachers' beliefs and practices about writing and the teaching of writing. The teachers often perceived this change as dramatic. One teacher spoke of going home each day of the workshop and crying "because, " she said, "I had to re-evaluate what I had done and make that comparison." Making that comparison--thinking about past practices--often involved some remorse. Rob, who teaches at an urban school, said, "I cringe when I think back on some of the things I used to do."

Those past practices usually sprang from a belief or assumption that writing is a product to be evaluated; that it arises from a conscious linear process, is a silent and solitary activity, is given to definite forms, and is best taught in steps: words, sentences, paragraphs, extended discourse. Correctness is paramount.

The movement away from these kinds of assumptions--for most teachers--continued after the project. These teachers' beliefs evolved, and as they reported those beliefs, they were consonant with those that are central to the IWP. Robin and Jake provide

us with typical examples of those stated beliefs. Robin said:

> You need to write for yourself first. You need to write about what's important to you. You need to write that for yourself rather than worrying about what anybody else might want. You need to communicate with yourself first to get that initial writing out of yourself. And from there consider an audience as you start to share.

And Jake said:

> I think it's to recognize that a variety of intellectual processes need to occur for a final product to occur. It is an attitudinal thing and it is saying "You are capable of generating ideas. You are capable of reworking them to the point where they can be shared." Virtually everyone can. It's a very inclusive kind of thing.

Most teachers, then, were relatively successful at translating their new beliefs into new practices. Many attempted to create an atmosphere that promoted and encouraged writing. They affirmed their students' efforts by responding positively and specifically to their writing, then expanded their audience by providing for peer response. The generous use of journals provided an opportunity for frequent student and teacher writing, free of teacher control and the constraints of language conventions. Sometimes, they became a place for students to reflect on their writing and writing processes. In these and undoubtedly in other ways, their attempts at moving from belief and intention to practice were quite successful.

Although it is certainly encouraging and exciting to see so much success, I found certain problematic areas to be more interesting. One kind of problematic area, where I will focus today, I labeled as a kind of "general instructional disharmony." In such cases the writing project graduates seemed to be engaging

in contradictory practices, or in practices that seemed to contradict their new beliefs. Such practices included grading by error counting, direct instruction in grammar and usage, and the use of isolated instructional units.

Although many of the teachers did not want to grade their students' writing, they felt that it was necessary to do so. "They're such different personalities, such different writers," Robin complained. "You can't assign points to writing," Wilma said. Louise explained:

> Probably one of the most difficult things with me is dealing with the grading--surrendering the objective tasks of grading--the quizzes and the things where it's easy to say this is the wrong answer. . . . I want to be able to say, "Well, you missed 5 so that's this grade." You can't do that with their writing.

Given a felt responsibility to grade their writing along with the perception that it was a difficult if not impossible task, the teachers fell back on error counting in order to assign points and a grade. Robin explained:

> They know that when I say it's gonna be a graded paper that it's not so much on the content . . . but on the correctness of their writing. It should be a paper that they've worked through. Certainly not a paper in progress, but a paper that they've worked with and taken through enough writing and reworking and paid enough attention to the correctness that it would come up to standard written English level. . . . That lets me off the hook. I still go through those papers even though I've probably read portions of them before, but I still go through and give positive response. But at that point I do also indicate to them spelling errors and anything that would not meet standard English. So I usually figure out some kind of point value per error . . . . I turn them somehow into points, put them on a scale, and give them a grade.

To let themselves "off the hook," the teachers fell back on

things like "standard written English" as criterion for evaluation. Becoming an evaluator also changed their role as a responder to student writing in that their response needed to justify the grade assigned. Robin, who believed in the power of positive response to "affirm and encourage" and who wanted her students to maintain control of "their own processes and products," found herself in grading papers "correcting mistakes" and telling students that they "shouldn't have put this sentence in" or they "should have used a different word." At the completion of a grading period or unit, roles and rules suddenly changed.

Actually the change may not have been so sudden. Although the teachers said that, "You can talk about subjects and verbs but it'll never carry over into their writing," some still made periodic use of large-group, direct instruction in grammar, usage, or punctuation in lieu of the "mini-lessons" and "work with individuals and groups that need a skill" which they had planned.

"As an English teacher, I feel accountable for the correctness of their written expression," Robin explained.

> I have no specific evidence that this is a definite problem. It follows me because I am an English teacher. I like to see things right when I read them. It's a guilt trip that I put on myself. The only person who really heightens this concern of mine is the English teacher these kids go to next. He's a grammarian and very concerned about their correctness. He'll say, 'Gosh, how could you stand those freshmen last year the way they do such and such.'

Robin and the others were haunted not always by any real problems

in their students' writing, but instead by a felt responsibility to their profession, students, and colleagues. English teachers, they felt, are supposed to worry about things like "correctness" and "standard written English."

Eileen, Robin, and Wilma also operated with traditional notions of curriculum, teaching individual instructional units. Although they valued writing and enjoyed teaching it, writing still remained only one or two of several units. Wilma told her students as they grew impatient with her library skills unit, "I don't want to spend a lot of time on it. We have a lot more important things to do than be saddled with a library unit." Later, after class, she announced, "I hate this library skills unit." Yet she began the school year with it. After ending her second unit, the one on writing, Wilma said:

> Some kids didn't write and feel good about their writing. That bothers me. . . . If they have more opportunities to write, kids'll eventually come up with something they're proud of, but I can't afford the time because I feel that in ninth grade I need to expose them to various genres of literature and other stuff.

As important as she believed writing and allowing time for writing is, Wilma left it behind because she also felt a responsibility to "expose" her students to poetry, novels, and short stories. Less enthusiastic about these units, she moved through them more quickly, often barely integrating writing. As a result, writing still remained slotted into specific instructional units.

Innovations are acts of faith, and it would seem that these teachers could more easily hold such faith because of the success they felt as students in the writing project, particularly in the afternoon writing workshops. As Rob said:

> When you go through the project you get this sense of community and you see this growth in your peers and it's not hard to imagine what the growth would be like in kids. And that's going to help you go back to the classroom more confidently and interject some of those same approaches.

The workshops gave the teachers a new approach and direct experience that such an approach could work. New "rituals" developed--green ink, journals, writing folders, conferences, responsive marginal and end comments--along with a new vocabulary--"process," "polish," "ownership," "draft"--all of which identified one as a member of a new community--an Iowa Writing Project process community. Teachers are often tired, busy, and lonely people; they hunger for such membership.

Clearly their participation in the Iowa Writing Project has had a strong continuing influence on these teachers. Their new belief systems about writing and the teaching of writing, their successes in enacting most parts of those belief systems, and the degree to which those beliefs--held and enacted--are consonant with IWP principles all serve as evidence of that influence. At the same time, those aspects of teachers' contexts that contribute to their fatigue and isolation may also thwart their efforts at change. Old assumptions may simply be joined by new and perhaps contradictory ones; a lack of time for reflection and

a separation from the new community keep these assumptions buried and unexamined. Ultimately this can be crippling.

The strong influence of their participation in the writing project has not yet enabled these teachers to exorcise old conceptions. As successful as they are, they are still haunted by contradictory beliefs and expectations about writing, teaching, and the teaching of writing, and thus they live with disharmony. We must confront these fundamental problems stemming from popular conceptions of schooling even as we congratulate ourselves on the success of these writing projects.

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INSERVICE EDUCATION AND TEACHER CHANGE:
A STUDY OF WRITING PROJECT GRADUATES

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I. BELIEFS

Robin: You need to write for yourself first. You need to write about what's important to you. You need to write that for yourself rather than worrying about what anybody else might want. You need to communicate with yourself first to get that initial writing out of yourself. And from there consider an audience as you start to share.

Jake: I think it's to recognize that a variety of intellectual processes need to occur for a final product to occur. It is an attitudinal thing and it is saying "You are capable of generating ideas. You are capable of reworking them to the point where they can be shared." Virtually everyone can. It's a very inclusive kind of thing.

II. INSTRUCTIONAL DISHARMONY: GRADING

Louise: Probably one of the most difficult things with me is dealing with the grading--surrendering the objective tasks of grading--the quizzes and the things where it's easy to say this is the wrong answer. . . . I want to be able to say, "Well, you missed 5 so that's this grade." You can't do that with their writing.

Robin: They know that when I say it's gonna be a graded paper that it's not so much on the content . . . but on the correctness of their writing. It should be a paper that they've worked through. Certainly not a paper in progress, but a paper that they've worked with and taken through enough writing and reworking and paid enough attention to the correctness that it would come up to standard written English level. . . . That lets me off the hook. I still go through those papers even though I've probably read portions of them before, but I still go through and give positive response. But at that point I do also indicate to them spelling errors and anything that would not meet standard English. So I usually figure out some kind of point value per error . . . . I turn them somehow into points, put them on a scale, and give them a grade.

III. INSTRUCTIONAL DISHARMONY: GRAMMAR

Robin: As an English teacher, I feel accountable for the correctness of their written expression. I have no specific evidence that this is a definite problem. It follows me because I am an English teacher. I like to see things right when I read them. It's a guilt trip that I put on myself. The only person who really heightens this concern of mine is the English teacher these kids go to next. He's a grammarian and very concerned about their correctness. He'll say, 'Gosh, how could you stand those freshmen last year the way they do such and such.'

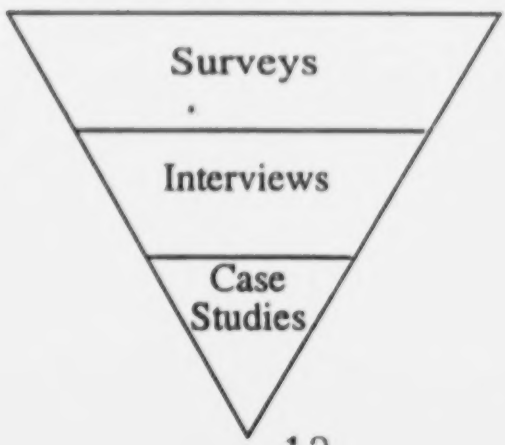
IV. INSTRUCTIONAL DISHARMONY: UNITS

Wilma: Some kids didn't write and feel good about their writing. That bothers me. . . . If they have more opportunities to write, kids'll eventually come up with something they're proud of, but I can't afford the time because I feel that in ninth grade I need to expose them to various genres of literature and other stuff.

V. INNOVATIONS

Rob: When you go through the project you get this sense of community and you see this growth in your peers and it's not hard to imagine what the growth would be like in kids. And that's going to help you go back to the classroom more confidently and interject some of those same approaches.

VI. DESIGN OF STUDY



VII. IWP PRINCIPLES

1. Writing can enhance learning in all areas of the school curriculum, at all levels. Writing is a way of creating meaning and of discovering what one knows.

2. Students need to write regularly and in varied contexts in order to become better writers. Teachers who themselves write regularly are likely to be credible when they advise students about the writing process and about the values of writing.

3. Writers need to know and care about what they write. Writers need to have ownership of their own processes and products. The knowledge used for writing should at least in part be based on the students' own experiences. The topics students write about should be negotiable.

4. Some people can write with ease, regularity, and joy--just as some people can talk with ease, regularity, and joy. Confidence is essential if people are to do this. An increase in confidence often means an increase in competence.

5. Writers of all ages need readers to respond to their work at various stages. In schools, students and teachers can serve that function; audiences beyond the school can be easily accessed as well. When facilitating the sharing of student writing, it is important to remember that writers can benefit more from positive than from negative comments on their writing.

6. Writing is a complicated process. Classroom experience needs to include time for all components of the writing process--composing, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, and reflecting on the process itself. It is sometimes tempting to give disproportionate attention to editing. Some student writing needs to go through revision and editing--some doesn't.

7. Writing occurs in a wide variety of contexts in a wide variety of forms for a wide variety of purposes. There is no such thing as a formula for "good" writing that will operate in all contexts.